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'The Day [of the Rescue Mission] Was One of the Worst of My Life'

The day [of the rescue mission] was one of the worst of my life. I wanted to spend every moment monitoring [its] progress... but had to stick to my regular schedule and act as though nothing of the kind was going on.

I asked Zbig to keep notes for me, while I tried to keep my mind on such routine duties as meeting with representatives about legislation, a private session with Israeli Labor Party leader Shimon Peres and a briefing for Hispanic leaders about our anti-inflation program.

Here are some of Brzezinski's notes, using Washington time, with my own clarifying comments in parentheses added later. [In brackets are editors' notes for clarification].

10:35 a.m.—President briefed by ZB on latest intelligence and on the initial stage of the operation. Takeoff as planned.

Noon—Lunch, president, vice president, Vance, Brown, Brzezinski, [White House chief of staff Hamilton] Jordan, [press secretary Jody] Powell. First indication that two helicopters may be down short of landing site.

(Although the weather forecast had been good, the helicopters ran into severe localized dust storms. One returned to the carrier, and another was left in the southern desert. We never knew until the final personnel count when it was all over that this helicopter crew had been picked up. It was a major worry for me right through the mission.)

Iranian post noted two aircraft flying low, without lights. (Our intelligence services were monitoring radio broadcasts throughout Iran.)

3:15 p.m.—Two helicopters down; naval task force thinks rest have landed and picked up crews, and thus six are on the way. Should know about Desert One [helicopter landing site] in about half an hour.

No upgrading of gendarmerie alert. (The Iranians had small police stations scattered around in the villages and towns. We successfully avoided them. There were no alerts until after our entire rescue team was completely out of Iran.)

All C130s have landed. Initial problem: three [Iranian motor] vehicles observed. One got away. One of the above, a bus with some 40 (44) people, presumably detained. Brown/Brzezinski consult and agree that no basis for abortion [of mission], will consult further as information comes in, and Brze-

zinski will brief the president and obtain his guidance.

(This was unexpected bad luck. We had observed this site for several weeks, and vehicular traffic near it was rare. Almost immediately after our landing, though, there was a busload of people, and then a fuel truck followed closely by a pickup truck.

(The two latter appeared to be driven by smugglers of gasoline, who took off across the desert in the pickup. It was highly unlikely that they would go to the police. In fact, Col. [Charles] Beckwith [ground forces commander] believed they thought our team was Iranian police.

(But the bus passengers would have to be prevented from sounding an alarm. I approved the removal of all of them to Egypt by C130 until the rescue itself was concluded, when they would be returned to Iran. We were very careful to avoid any casualties.)

4:21 p.m.—Gen. Jones has heard from [Maj.] Gen. [James] Vaught (who was in Egypt and in overall charge of the operation) that everything is under control at Desert One. No one hurt or eliminated. Escaped vehicle proceeded southwest to town 15 miles away, which has gendarmerie post, unmanned at night.

Four helicopters refueled at 4 p.m. (EST); two being refueled. (This put us somewhat behind schedule but in itself was no problem.) One had been forced down temporarily in the sandstorm, then pressed forward to join the others. One that went down has gone back to the carrier.

Vaught expects everything to be over in 40 minutes. Has report that everything "green" at drop-off, and transport is ready.

4:45 p.m.—Brown to Brzezinski: "I think we have an abort situation. One helicopter at Desert One has hydraulic problem. We thus have less than the minimum six to go." C130s to be used to extract. Request decision on mission termination from the president literally within minutes (because of the importance of completing the operation during nighttime).

4:50 p.m.—The president, after obtaining a full report from Brzezinski, requests full information from Brown and Jones and specifically the recommendation from the ground commander. (Beckwith and Vaught in Egypt both recommended termination, complying with the previous plan, which required a minimum of six helicopters.)

4:57 p.m.—The president to Brown: "Let's go with his recommendation," and the mission is aborted.

At this point, the vice president, [Deputy Secretary of State Warren] Christopher, Powell and Jordan joined me and Zbig in my small study, later followed by Vance and then Brown. Although despondent about the failure of the mission, we felt we had the situation well under control.

Careful plans had been made to abort the operation at any time there might be unforeseen problems or a chance of detection. I was grievously disappointed but thanked God that there had been no casualties.

5:18 p.m.—Brown informs the president that we don't know whereabouts of one helicopter and don't know the crew loss.

5:32 p.m.—President calls Jones on secure phone and learns all crews not accounted for. President instructs that needless military action be avoided; air cover if needed for extraction, but an engagement should be avoided. Show of force first before shooting down any Iranian planes.

(All of this referred to the helicopter crew we believed to be on the ground in southern Iran. If necessary, I was ready to send in military forces from the aircraft carriers to protect the crew. At one point, intelligence sources reported a beeper signal from the downed helicopter.)

Discussion of what communication to make to the Iranians and of the needed report to the American people. (After our rescue team departed, I needed to calm the Iranians, who would find our abandoned helicopters. I planned to tell them the truth and hoped they would believe it.)

5:58 p.m.—President on secure phone informed by Jones that helicopter smashed into C130, some casualties, may be very serious, team transferring into another C130. (I was sickened with concern about our men. Brief delays seemed like hours as I waited to obtain accurate reports about casualties. All of us sat quietly, very tense. I prayed.)

6:21 p.m.—President informed by Jones that a number dead in the crash—helicopter crew, pilot of C130 and some passenger—(members of the rescue team). The rest are being extricated by C130.

(In taking off to move away from the loaded transport planes, the helicopters had